

INTERVIEWEE: EUGENE ROBERTS

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 19 May 1980

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: This is an interview with Gene Roberts for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on Monday, May 19, 1980, at nine o'clock in the morning at his home at 74860 Borego in Palm Desert.

I think we can, I know that . . . There, that's better.

ER: I sit forward?

PY: No, it will pick up. No problem. I think we can start this morning by talking about how you came to Palm Desert and your early involvement with the community.

ER: I came to Palm Desert in 1950. And I bought five acres of dates what is, on Country Club, what is now Country Club Road in Rancho Mirage. And I came down to build a little one-room hideout and develop long weekends get away from in town. And then I ran into Cliff Henderson, and Cliff and I talked at length about

building condominiums. There were none then. I built the first condominium in the desert. And so I established an office down here, ran the construction work out of the office down here three days a week and ran my business in the Pacific Palisades three days a week. Finally the load got too heavy, so I became so enamored with this area that I moved down here, closed my office up in town.

PY: What were the condominiums that you built?

ER: Sun Lodges. You know where they are.

PY: But you might mention where they are.

ER: Well, the Sun Lodges are, well, almost the exact center of Palm Desert today. We started out with five. I specked them. And my avenue was building them and Cliff's avenue was selling them. And, of course, my banker told me I was out of my mind for specking five things out here in the middle of the desert, but I did it anyway. And it turned into a very successful venture.

PY: Were they sold quickly?

ER: Yes. Had they not been sold quickly, it wouldn't have been successful. We, then the first five, we knew we had to get a name in one of the five of them or hopefully we would get a name in one of the houses. We sold two to Danny and Joe, and then the third one, we sold that

to Bergen. And we knew then that we had it made. We could go on and build a whole block of them.

PY: With the ranch here, why did Edgar Bergen want to, a condominium?

ER: I don't know. I don't know. He did have a ranch here at the time. And he was a friend of Cliff's. I guess Cliff sold him on it. It was quite a deal. We sold, they were sold on a fifteen-year lease with a fifteen-year option to renew. And we sold them at ten thousand nine hundred dollars, two bedroom. Once we got the first five moved, it wasn't a matter of them taking them away from us, but the community had started to, that was really the start of the community growth; about the only thing in the community then was the Shadow Mountain Club which Cliff had built. And was selling property from Shadow Mountain Club. Have you interviewed Cliff? Did he tell you who was behind him when he came down here? Okay. I guess that's the way he got started. Then the community grew, and finally got the post office moved from that side of the highway over to this side of the highway. And various slogans were, came out of Cliff, had a very nimble mind. And we were sitting out on the porch in the Shadow Mountain Club overlooking the

pool, and he thought of a slogan, "The smartest address on the American desert." And most of the slogans that you see around here pertaining to the town of Palm Desert came out of Cliff.

PY: Were there other, you said they were the first condominiums in the desert, was the condominium a concept that was popular?

ER: No, I'd never heard of it. I think this is a figment of Cliff's imagination, too. I don't know. I'd never heard of it before. There was a little talk right after we started of building some at, over at the Racquet Club in Palm Springs. Whether they ever did or not, I don't know. I didn't pay too much attention to that. I was busy enough trying to run an office three days a week here and three days a week in town. Met myself coming and going. Drove it at first for about six months. Then I decided that was for the birds, so I started flying.

PY: In the Desert Air?

ER: Yes. I'd go with Desert Air. Yes. One of the two spots in the desert, the Shadow Mountain Club and the Desert Air.

PY: Do you know where Cliff got the idea for building condominiums?

ER: I don't know. I really don't know. That's what brought me down here when he decided to do them. And where he got the idea, I have no idea. But I'd never heard of them before. But they were directed, the selling was directed toward hopefully for celebrities and automobile dealers. More toward automobile dealers than celebrities because at that time the automobile business was exceedingly productive. And Cliff's idea was to build something like the Sun Lodges and build the Sun Lodges and sell them to automobile dealers who could use them for their own use, but primarily could send a bit of customers, their fleet dealers and people like that down here for a week, down to the desert, and give them a pass to the Shadow Mountain Club. And then they could, when it wasn't being used for that purpose, they could use it themselves. And the first one we got was Fisher, Fisher Buick in Beverly Hills, I believe. He was the first automobile dealer we got. And then the community started to going around them.

PY: Didn't they look pretty desolate

ER: Well, not so bad because Fire Cliff Lodge was right across the street. It wasn't as big as it is now. I built about the last half of that. But it did have the

dining facilities and the bar and a few units, rented units. But the whole Palm Desert was pretty desolate, believe me. There was an awful lot more houses, or lots of houses. There wasn't much here at the time.

PY: When did you actually build the first Sun Lodge?

ER: Nineteen fifty. I came down here and bought the ranch in late forty-nine. No, I came down here and bought the ranch in early fifty. And started the Sun Lodges right after that.

PY: Is that where Johnny Dawson got the idea for the condos at Thunderbird?

ER: I don't know where Johnny got his idea. Of course, at that time there was no Thunderbird. No such thing as Thunderbird. None of the golf courses. No golf course at Shadow Mountain. I don't know where Johnny got his idea. His original idea was to build a club, get a new job.

PY: Yes.

ER: I didn't know he had condominiums at Thunderbird. Does he?

PY: He said, yes, that was the first time a club had used condominiums.

ER: Yes. I guess that was the first golf club around here.

I think Desert Air had a little free par deal.

PY: Yes, he's in Los Angeles.

ER: Is he?

PY: Yes.

ER: Is that right?

PY: Starting his second career.

ER: What's he doing?

PY: I don't know.

ER: Still an architect?

PY: No, it's sort of a side light of that.

ER: (phone rings) Oh.

PY: Something else.

: I'll get it.

ER: Is that right?

PY: Yes. (phone rings) Anything

ER: Yes, he is. He's quite an amazing man.

PY: Now was your property next to his or . . .

ER: No.

PY:

ER: My property, Denny's property was, we had an adjacent corner. His was from this point toward Del Sol Road, which is now Bob Hope, and I had a corner here this way.

So our properties barely touched each other. I don't remember whether I bought it in forty-nine or fifty, one of the two. Of course, we were, there was one other family out in that area named Danny Callahan and he was right in the building. Denny was across the street. He was working in Hank Gogerty's grapes. And they had a packing plant on the other side of what is now Bob Hope Drive.

PY: That was the first incline?

ER: Yes.

PY: So did you actually at any point live on that property?

ER: Oh, yes. I built a block house, basically kitchen, big living room with two beds in it and a bathroom. As I say, it was for a weekend, a long weekend, get away from the office deal. And then we moved down. And of course, before we moved down, I enlarged, I put two bedrooms on it. And it still didn't have any air conditioning. Guess a year or so later put in the air conditioning. We lived there, and I lived there for several years. Used to party with Johnny Dawson all the time. Too tough of a man.

PY: (chuckle) So you were involved in date raising then?

ER: Yes. And then I planted lemons under the dates. Then I

got another five acres over there with tangarines on it. Real small tangarines, which was on the other side of Denny's property, all that property. And then I sold the ranch and kept the tangarines. I enjoyed, I farmed both places myself, enjoyed it. And then I finally sold the tangarines to a golf pro named Johnny. He was at, ended up at Tamarisk. He's one of the, probably known best for the fact that pros on the tour would get into trouble with Johnny. He's quite a teaching pro. And he let the tangarines go. They were just four hundred feet off of what is now Bob Hope Drive. Then I built a house for a dentist right across the street from that on the other side of Bob Hope Drive. Another dentist. He was a pediatrician, Santa Monica. That's where I was raised on a farm. Built him a house over there. About that time the Tierra Del Sol, are you familiar with it, came into being.

PY: As a party, was he in that or . . .

ER: Oh, no, he was not in it. He was right next to it.

I mentioned that because the two properties were adjacent. I was so interested in the fact that somebody would take forty acres and build houses on it out in the middle of the desert. I was wondering whether they'd sell or not.

They certainly did.

PY: Was that unheard of?

ER: Well, honest, aside from Palm Springs, and I was on that side of the highway, this whole area was just open desert. And anybody to take a spot like that and buy the land and put houses on it on a gamble that somebody would slow down enough to stop and buy it, they were taking a gamble.

PY: Do you know who that was?

ER: No, I don't know who that was. I never learned who it was. Then our kids were going to school here through the first sixth grades. Then they were bused down to Indio for seventh and eighth, the middle school. And, of course, bused on into Coachella at that time because there was no Indio high school. And then Indio built into a high school and that took the one down south. Then Palm Desert decided they wanted a school board member from Palm Desert, so I happened to be the first one that had ever been elected from Palm Desert. What else do you want? More background on what?

PY: Let's go on to the school board a bit. What was the relationship with this area to the school district? Was there any hard feeling? Was it considered an

outlying area?

ER: Yes, there was a certain amount of hard feeling from the standpoint of Palm Desert because they felt that there was a time after I was elected, I don't remember how long I stayed on the board twelve years.

PY: When were you elected?

ER: I was elected the night I was installed as president of the Palm Desert Rotary Club. I think that was 1955, fifty-four or fifty-five. And Palm Desert didn't feel they were getting the right treatment. They weren't being listened to by the board, by the school board. And they were requesting, their demands if you want to put it that way, were not taken seriously. They were brushed off. So they decided that they wanted to get a man from Palm Desert on the school board now. So at one time, after I was elected, this will give you an idea of why they were, one of the reasons why they were screaming for representation. (phone rings) Excuse me. About fifty percent of the taxation base for the school system was Washington this way. And they felt as long as they were paying the money that they should have some say. And they had this disagreement. You mean my running for the school board?

PY: Yes, the fact that there should be in the area.

ER: I think it was Hal Teff. I believe Jerry Call and Hal Teff and Ted Smith were the ones that talked to me and asked me if I would run. I'd never had that much contact with the educational world, that is from the standpoint of being a board member during the program. I was a graduate engineer at USC, but certainly that's a far cry from being a school board member.

PY: Wasn't it just the open election so that anyone from in the area could run?

ER: Right. This district has always been a wide open district. It was never put it in the ward category where, in this area, so you're elected from that area. It's always been wide open. And it was a tough election. As I recall there were, they'd just expanded the school board from three members to five members in this election. Before we were seated as members, the school board was three members, and then this election increased the membership from three to five. And there was one person going off so three of us were elected in that election and we became a board of five. And we didn't have the, oh, we didn't have the minority complaints and protests and all of that garbage. It was really a pleasant job

because nobody was looking at you from behind your back. You were all trying to do the right thing. I thought it was an outstanding school board. We had Judge Frank Moore. You know Frank? And Curt Newman who, he and his father owned the telephone company. And Ray Windlehagen who two years ago was mayor of Indio. And Dorothy Wilford who has moved out of the area. And then came Ann McAlister, Fred McAlister's wife. We had it to get along well. We thought we got the job done. Didn't have any backbiting at the place. You always get complaints, but nothing serious. Then Palm Desert became satisfied when we had a representative on the board. They wanted somebody to talk to and bring their complaints to and stand up in the board meeting and present their side of what they wanted. It was not a demanding, you sat up on the board meeting and pound the desk. You would get it or you don't. The whole attitude was somewhat different.

PY: And has it continued to have someone from this area on the board?

ER: I believe so. Let's see, Frank Moore quit before I did on the board. I don't remember who they appointed when I left the board. By that time it was a unified school

district. Does this subject interest you?

PY: Yes. It's very important.

ER: Okay. We were an elementary school district, and I was elected to the elementary school district before Indio High School came into being. Then Indio High School came into being and the State Department of Education was putting pressure on all the local school boards to unify. Unify, bring the high school into the district on the basis, and the philosophy that you could run a straight-through curriculum. You didn't have to have a curriculum for seven grades and then another board that thought differently with regard to education would not follow through on the same type of a curriculum. So it sounded reasonable. And so, of course, it had to be voted on. And the year that I was president of the board, the first time I was president of the board, the election, we got it onto the ballot. And then we thought probably the best thing to do was to gather each area within our district because we were getting terrific flak from the Taxpayers Association. They had a board of directors that, oh, about five or six people and what their membership was who knows. Whether they had five more people or five hundred more, I don't know.

But they were really potshotting us. We got terrific amount of flak. And they had board members. We felt that it wasn't good to fight back at them too much, to call them names like they were calling us and all of that, so we kept our mouth shut and took the heat. But we figured the best way to get this thing through was to go to the various areas like Palm Desert as an area. So we had it highly publicized, but the board would be in Palm Desert at seven o'clock on the x day of y month to answer any questions with regard to unification because the district was, the taxpayers made it a point to stir up the district, and they did a real good job of it. So we went to each area, like we went to Palm Desert, we went to La Quinta, we went to North Indio, Indio, out by, let's see, that would be southwest Indio. We covered about seven areas. And just rather informal, held an informal meeting, and the audiences were there. There were plenty of them. And we would just open the meeting by saying, now we've come here to explain the things about unification that you probably don't understand because you have no contact with the unification and educational system. And we got it across and their point. They (phone rings) voted the referendum that

unified school district, and so we did get a final school district. Then when we unified, we picked up Indio High School in the unification, of course. Before that it had been High School and Indio High School as a district. Well, we took Indio High School away from that district which again is very logical because all of our students . . . Indio High School was based on an area bounded by the area that bounded the K through seven grades. So it made it an easy transfer. We didn't have to throw out certain students who came to high school from Coachella. The boundaries of Indio High School were exactly the same. So it gave us no problem at all. The board had to be, another board had to be elected, a unified district board, which is now Desert Sands Unified District. We went to Indio Elementary District. And it was decided by the superintendent of schools that the Indio Elementary District would continue as a district until Indio High School came in one year later. This is after the election. Also in order to prepare the move, the preparations for the move, another school board was elected called the Desert Sands Unified District School Board District. And three of our board won seats on that board, and two

of Coachella District won seats on that board, so we were a five-person board. And viciously split two and two. It was a very, very bitter situation.

PY: Now Coachella Valley High School was not included in this district, the Desert Sands District.

ER: No. Coachella Valley High School was over here and Indio High School here. They were a district. Then this high school was in the pillow I'm sitting on district. So when this district unified, then this district picked up Indio High School, and Coachella Valley became Coachella Junior High School.

PY: Well, how come the new Desert Sands District included Coachella Elementary?

ER: It didn't. Never at any time.

PY: I thought you said there was some vicious fights over Coachella.

ER: No, this is on the board. You see, the five board members down here, two of them were from Indio. Well, when this happened, the unification happened, they decided they wanted to be on this board. Now we've got two boards now for one year, period of one year we had two school boards. One is an elementary board running the elementary system, and the other is a unified district

board preparing one year after the election for the unified district to come into being. And for this board to pick up Indio High School.

PY: I see.

ER: Am I correct?

PY: Yes.

ER: Okay. I don't know, that board, I don't know what, they've had periods when it's been a very difficult situation on that board. They've just gone through one until about a year ago. You're probably familiar and heard all about that.

PY: Well, I've heard about Dr.

ER: That's enough. But this was a very, was a strict three to two dog eat dog battle. And it got so bad that I became thoroughly convinced that that was going to continue, so after two years on that board and ten years, eleven years on the other board, I served on both boards, of course, for a year. I finally decided that it was a bum situation, so I resigned and bowed out.

PY: Is there still a problem with representation over this area?

ER: I don't think so now. I don't think so. Isn't Jensen on that school board?

PY: I don't know.

ER: Yes, I think he is. He's from this area. And Anderson was on before him. I don't remember.

PY: What is the difficulty with getting a high school in this area? Population?

ER: Well, I don't know. This is nothing new. This has been the wind and, in fact, we bought the property where this high school would go, out by, on Cook. We bought that property at that time.

PY: In the fifties?

ER: This unified board that I spent two years on bought that property, so this is nothing new. At that time, even though I was from Palm Desert, I was adamant against the high school out there because we had a, we could show a possible student population of three hundred students, and it's a disservice to the people in the community to build a high school for three hundred students because you cannot offer a program, a well-balanced, all-encompassing program of education when you only have that few students. In other words, you can't have wood shop and metal shop and speaking and basket weaving and all those, go the whole spectrum of educational courses that are offered today in a high

school or have been in a high school, you couldn't do that for three hundred students. In the first place, you couldn't afford it. You didn't have enough tax base. And secondly, if you do it, the program would be cut down to the point where education would not be good at all under those circumstances. You couldn't offer the variety of courses. And now I don't know why, well, I do know why, in the first place, they don't have the money, they don't have any way to get it. It's become a pretty difficult situation since Prop 13 went through. I don't know whether yet they have enough students. I don't know how many students would come out of this area. This mushroom growth we've had has not brought children in, basically. It's been a condominium adult life. Certainly you do have the people who have to take care of those people and service them that are going to have kids. So we're going to get some coming in, but I don't know how many students would be available for high school. Would be easy to find out. You've got two middle schools here, sixth and seventh grade, and you'd find out how many to graduate and then multiply it by four and that would give you the answer four years from now when the school was full. Or you could go to

Indio High School and find out how many kids are from Palm Desert.

PY: Are Rancho Mirage kids going, too?

ER: Rancho Mirage breaks at Bob Hope Drive. The Desert Sands Unified District is this side of Rancho Mirage, I mean of Bob Hope Drive. Palm Springs District takes it the other side. And then up in the hill and Crest, places like that, go to Palm Springs. And we always adopted attitude that we weren't going to let out kids out of our district unless it was absolutely essential. And we didn't want people from other districts to come in because we had quite a situation at one time where several kids from Coachella High School wanted to come to Indio High School. They thought it was more of a bedroom community. And that put a stop to it. So we just drew up rules and regulations that every kid's had to come before the board first had to be filtered through the district superintendent and had to come before the board, and the board made the final decision. Then, as in the state of California, if the parent can't get the kid transferred from here to here because this board won't take them. Even though that board will let them go, this board

won't take them. It's their prerogative to go before the Riverside County Board of Education and appeal the case, and then we have to do what they say. We've claimed that in education, haven't we?

PY: Fascinating, just fascinating. No, I think it's very important because it certainly says something about, you know, the past and the future of this area in terms of that, and your son, Kent?

ER: Yes.

PY: Now if you wanted to go to Coachella and Indio?

ER: No, he went to Coachella. He went to Coachella High School.

PY: Was that at all difficult in the sense of having to go so far?

ER: He couldn't do anything else even then

PY: And did you have to drive or was he bused?

ER: Well, he was bused. And then like most kids today they get a car about their junior year, car and a girl. And they seem to go hand in hand. Then they're broke from then on. I coach the college now. I have a out there. Kid gets a car and has got a girl and he's really got to produce the money to stay in school. It was very difficult, yes. I was highly insensed that

he had to go to junior high school in Indio. I was not married, and I was taking care of him including the ironing and all that kind of stuff. And here this kid's got to go to school clear down there in Indio. And I didn't like it at all. There wasn't a whole lot I could do about it, but I didn't like it. Then when he got out of that, he went to Coachella High School. That was a way of life. But I didn't have as much beef as people from Desert Center and the mine out there. They were busing in the kids from the mine. They had about an hour and twenty minutes to an hour and a half ride on the school bus from the mine. And the kids that participated in activities at Coachella High School, by virtue of the fact that they participated in activities at Coachella High School, the bus had to wait to take the handful of kids back to the mine. So the kids who weren't in activities, athletics, speech, drama, they had to wait for their bus to leave. They had to wait probably two hours for the bus to leave, so I wasn't, I didn't complain quite so loud.

PY: (laughter) I can see why. It doesn't give you much ground to stand on.

ER: No, no.

PY: Are they still being bused in or has that situation been

ER: No, they have a school out there, Vermont. They have a very small high school, Eagle Mountain High School. That situation has been cleared up.

PY: Getting back just to Palm Desert, what else did you then build around here after the Sun Lodges?

ER: Well, the idea of condominiums so appealed to me and was such a hot product, I bought a little piece of land on the corner of Fairway and San Luis Rey, I guess, and returned to Shadow Mountain Club and separated into eight parcels and put a swimming pool on one parcel and condominiums on the other seven by myself. And there were only two contractors in the area, so I did an awful lot of contract work. I'd say of the first hundred houses built here, I built at least fifty of them because there's only one other contractor, and he was no more big deal than I was. The thought of club living brought into that building at The Heights, Thunderbird Heights, was his father, and I first gone through. And his father was twenty years older than I was. So that, oh, I built about, building about the place. I built his place for him.

I built motels and houses, anything that came along, you name it. Have you ever played golf on the Shadow Mountain Golf Course?

PY: No.

ER: Well, there's a big house right in the middle of it.

Golf course completely surrounds this house, and I built that for a guy who owned a manufacturing plant in Chicago. And that thing was right out in the middle of nowhere. That was before there was a golf course, and it was really out in the boondocks. And then, of course, Mon Walgren was the guy that, his mom was governor of, maybe Cliff told you about that, how the golf course came into being. Well, Cliff Henderson and Hap Arnold and Firestone and his group owned the Shadow Mountain Club and surrounding properties which I'm sure he told you. But it was sold to the members of the club. And this was a family club. We all raised our kids around that swimming pool, literally. And then Mon Walgren, the then governor of the state of Washington, became a member of his club and decided there should be a golf course. The property wasn't selling. We owned this property and we owed Cliff and his group for it, and it wasn't selling. And Mon had the idea we should put

a golf course in there. And couldn't get it through the board. I happened to be on the board at the time. Couldn't get it through the board. Took him about two or three years, oh, three or four years to finally get it through the board to build the golf course as it exists today. We had a little three-putt deal on an out hole, three par pitching putt deal on the Shadow Mountain Club where those condominiums are now, this side of Shadow Mountain Club. So they decided to build one. I was so adamantly against it, I resigned from the board. And one other, the guy that owns Bob Owen. Have you talked to him?

PY: No.

ER: He felt exactly like I did. We were adamantly against it. We felt it was a losing proposition, and we didn't feel like we should encumber the club members for the ones who would be encumbered for the cost and the operation of the golf course. And the figures that Mon brought to us were absolutely out in left field because his experience is in the state of Washington where it rains about three times a day, and he didn't have the water problems, he didn't have the expense problems we would have here. He got it through and the golf

course was built and it's today highly successful.
Very successful.

Side 2:

ER: Everything was sold, almost all real estate in this area was sold by Cliff and his brother Carl who had a real estate office down on the highway, and Edith Eddy Ward, who was a realtor here. Between the three of them, they sold almost all the early profits in this area. And, of course, like so many areas it was a very struggling community. It sold all it's property and people didn't build houses on it. They bought it with stars in their eyes that the property was going to appreciate. They bought this hunk of desert, a little hunk of desert, and it was going to make them rich, not make them rich, but it would appreciate in price. And so we went through a lot of years of feathers and not much chicken as far as the real estate picture was concerned. My operation was successful from the time I came down here. But the property, people would buy this piece of property from the corporation, corporation being Cliff and his backers, and they'd hold it for a couple of years and property wasn't moving and they'd

become unhappy with it so they'd throw it back on the market again. If they were too unhappy, they took less money for their property than they'd paid for it. I saw a lot of that. And then it began to come along. And it's only been in the last few years that the property has been

PY: Why particularly the property around the Shadow Mountain Club? I would think that would be prime property.

ER: Well, wouldn't sell in there. Palm Desert wasn't selling.

This was a, as I said, this was a feathers and not chicken deal for a lot of years. Nobody ever heard of Palm Desert. I think the first publicity, national publicity, that Palm Desert got, Hal and I used to put on this tennis tournament and we got the top guys.

One of them were members of our club, Shadow Mountain Club, like the president knew Perry Jones who controlled all tennis in Southern California and mostly throughout the United States. And I mean he controlled it. Poncho Gonzales, you've heard of him. When Poncho started to come along, he flunked a semester in high school and

played tennis because you can't play tennis.

You can go back and make your grades, then come back to it, they'll put you back. And the kid was only about

sixteen years old. That's how Perry controlled tennis. And I would say of the top ten players in the United States at that time seven or eight of them have come out of Southern California, so Perry was the king of tennis nor the undisputed ruler. And there at Palm Springs at the Racquet Club was putting on a tournament, an invitational, inviting sixteen men and eight women. And they'd go to Perry and say, okay, we want our list of competitors, and they got the cream, number one, two, three and maybe five and six in the United States. It was a weekend tournament, and it was highly successful from a publicity standpoint. Well, the kid started getting in trouble in Palm Springs and competitors. So Paul came to Bob who was president of our club then and said, why don't you put this tournament on in Palm Desert. Well, I had had a tennis background and Hal had had a tennis background. So Bob Miler came to us and said, hey, how about putting on this tennis tournament? I'll see that you get the national stars. So we said, put it on. And, of course, the first year we started hammering that the dateline, the newspaper is Palm Desert, but we couldn't make it stick. It always came out Palm Springs. And after a couple of years of our

efforts we were about ready to, we really didn't know what to do. So we finally decided that on top of getting the competitors out here and putting them up, and we put them up motels if we had to, but we had tennis enthusiasts, a few of them, here in our little town, and it was little by then, that would take a national star, loved to have him. Then we fed them at the club, and the club picked up the tab on that because it was good business for them and good publicity. And we would get a few sponsors that would pay for the hotel. So we decided we would invite the press down like we do in the Dinah Shore Pro Game, Palmolive now. We decided to invite the guests down and the whole media, the press, radio, television and just give them the business for the weekend

PY: Is this the sixties already we're talking about?

ER: Around somewhere the end of the fifties and early sixties. The tournament, I put it on for about, I guess, five years. And the press came. Free food and booze will bring the press from anywhere. Television didn't, a couple of stations they knew, sportscasters down. So I went in a couple of television stations, took me a bunch of tickets for the tournament and talked

to the guys who were sports editors of the TV stations, two of them, gave them a handful of tickets and told them that I'll leave you these tickets, we'd do anything we could if they could come down and pull them out if not, but please would they change this Palm Springs third line to Palm Desert. And that also that in order to keep them appraised of what was going on in the tennis world and when the tournament started, I would call them each night, the afternoon late when the daily tournament was over, playing was over. I'd call them and tell them who'd won and give them the highlights on what had happened down here. And that's what started freezing out all these Palm Springs date-lines. Now, of course, Palm Desert, everybody knows Palm Desert, even up in Canada where I go fishing. But to my knowledge that was the first media, our first attempt to get the media to recognize Palm Desert and not Palm Springs.

PY: Were the events very well attended?

ER: No. There weren't enough people that liked tennis down there. We didn't, we'd have maybe fifty. When you're watching the number one tennis pro in the United States, in the world, We always put it on in the

first week in February. And one year the kids had just come back from beating Australia in the Davis Cup, and we got two of the Davis Cup players. One of them was the top player in the world. And we'd get fifty-odd, or seventy-five, get a hundred people out there. That's about all.

PY: Were they coming from L. A. at all or Southern California?

ER: No, just local. Oh, occasionally you'd get . . . you've got to remember we didn't have a freeway down here.

L. A. was another, was an hour longer then than it is now from here. So you didn't get the people down.

You'd get the locals and the few in Indio that played tennis, were interested in tennis. That's about it.

What else can I interest you in?

PY: (laughter) I was going to ask you a question about that. I can't remember what it is now. Well, what really did it then? Do you think Eisenhower coming to the area?

ER: What did what?

PY: The dateline problem.

ER: Oh, it was broken by the time I was there. It was just . . . it's just like a kid. You've got to walk before you can run, and we walked for a lot of years. And then

when the momentum starts to build, once you crack it, then it takes a long time. You've got to fight it and fight it and fight it. Then all at once people began to realize that there was a Palm Desert. But we didn't have a lot of people down there. I can remember going to a banquet in Shadow Mountain Club for the first hundred homeowners in Palm Desert, and that was probably in the middle fifties. Somewhere in fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six.

PY: Did TV ever cover the tournament

ER: No, never did. We didn't have any local TV.

PY: I mean from L. A. stations

ER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That's what broke us on TV, was going in there and talking to them and calling them and wetnursing them and babying them. And we'd finally get them to, each night they'd say that on tennis fronts so and so and so and so. Of course, it could only be because we had the top players in the world, top players in the United States, which were then, the top tennis players in the world then were Australia and the United States. And we got the top ones from the United States, so television would listen to us.

PY: But they didn't actually come out to cover it?

ER: No. No way. Now the coverage for two stations.

PY: Locally.

ER: Yes. Wilson's sent a representative down here and helped us run the tournament. He did the dirty work on running the tournament. We had everything going for us. Okay, Honey. Pat, yes, right. Honey, can we . . . or are we through?

PY: What were some of the other things that were going on to make the community better? I know just from talking to Hal off and on that there were a lot of things that had to take place before the community could grow and develop as it has. What were some of those things that you were involved with or that you are familiar with?

ER: I just remember we were fighting so to be publicized, get people to buy down here, all that. Well, we had Shadow Mountain Club. Everything was the Shadow Mountain Club then. We had a Shadow Mountain Club ball team that played night ball. We had a Shadow Mountain Club bowling team that bowled. This is in Indio, that bowled in Indio. We're digging pretty deep. We got a choreographer out of Hollywood who had a place down here for a few years. And we talked him into putting on a show using song and dance show, using members of the Shadow

Mountain Club, as they were. And we did that every year for four or five years.

PY: Was that the beginning of the playhouse?

ER: No. Didn't have anything to do with the playhouse.

No, this was just a pun show on town and people that were fools enough to get up on the stage and try not to sound and look too bad.

PY: Sounds like you joined them.

ER: I was one of them. And then we had our school battle.

PY: How about utilities? Were you at all involved in the struggle over utilities here?

ER: No. Not at all.

PY: Did the lack of direct phone service hamper you in any way in the fifties?

ER: No. What do you mean direct phone service?

PY: Like you couldn't call into Palm Springs without it being long distance for awhile.

ER: Well, that was so in Indio. I don't remember that it was, it must have been. You talked to somebody that gave you that information. I moved out of this area for about ten years and developed a ranch in Indio. And then came back.

PY: Oh.

ER: In Indio you couldn't call Palm Springs then without it being a toll call. Palm Desert. But if you've heard that, it must be so. It didn't bother us that much, no. We had a lot, a lot of things were a lot more important than that

PY: Such as.

ER: Well, the growth of a young community in an outlying area. And I go to Lake Havasu City occasionally. Have you ever been over there?

PY: No.

ER: Well, I just can see Palm Desert thirty years ago. More land sold than they knew what to do with. Nobody's build houses on it. People putting the land back on the market that are griping about the fact that they've got too much money in a lot down here that they can't do anything with or can't even sell. And those things. Of course, being in the construction business those were very close to me. We had our problems. I can't remember what they were. We had our problems.

PY: Was it at all difficult getting materials down here for construction?

ER: No. I never had any trouble. No problem at all.

PY: Because I know Mrs. Duncan mentioned it to me, that

she had to go into L. A. a lot personally to pick up materials and things. (laughter) Didn't know where the area was and they sort of bypassed it.

ER: I never had any trouble. And I was here a lot before he was. I don't know why he had so much trouble. Of course, I've never had trouble getting materials and so on. We didn't have a building department at that time.

PY: In the county.

ER: No county building department. And so we were knocked over by a building department. Must have been five years after I came down here that they put a branch of the county building department out here. But not to be bothered by building inspectors, almost too much.

PY: Wasn't some of that covered by the incorporation, however, in terms of standards?

ER: No. No, we had absolutely no building standards according to the, according to anybody. The only building standards that I had were the ones that I built within myself. I said I'm going to do a good job and I'm going to do it right. And if a guy wanted to come down here and take the market for all he could take it

for, he could come down and take it. And he could use poor materials, poor workmanship, poor equipment, bad wiring, the whole bit. And then when the building department did come in, they were just feeling their way. They used the state code to start with, which is a lot substandard to the, to our code in Riverside County today, much substandard. And a lot of the things were not covered, of course. So they came in and they tread lightly for three or four years. Now I understand that my, I know my fuse is too short to take this building apart that we've got here now. My son's doing it all the time. He tells me what he does here, not that it isn't right, but it's never been used to it.

PY: Was there much bad building here in this

Improper, bad is not the word, perhaps it's substandard.

ER: I understand what you mean. No, I understand what you mean. I don't think so. I think most of the builders the first ten years that came in here did a reasonably good job. I think a few of them came in that did a bum job, but those things get around pretty fast. The only way a builder can advertise is word of mouth. And Merlin and I were trying to do the same thing, trying to make money. And our philosophy was if you make money,

if you do right by your customers, your clients, and they'll tell their friends, and it just worked out that way. Couple, three or four guys came in, stayed a year, and then got out because of a difficult situation.

But basically you see an awful lot of houses around here that were built thirty years ago, maybe twenty-five years ago, and that's the testimony. There was a lot of junk downtown. Cliff had a habit of buying up an old building somewhere and moving it in and putting it on what is one eleven today. An office building I brought down, a group of five buildings, all in one under one roof. They were a real job.

PY: Was there any objection from the committee that they had these eyesores out there?

ER: No, the community wasn't that big.

PY: Oh.

ER: This was a real one-horse operation. You take out the thousands of houses you have in Palm Desert today and put a hundred houses in that area, and it's a long way back, and that's what it was. I think when I came here there were maybe twenty-five houses in this area and that was about all.

PY: How about in Palm Village?

ER: Oh, I don't know what the population of Palm Village was then. I don't know, maybe five hundred people. I wouldn't have the slightest idea. That's where all your old stuff was, and naturally because it was there first. Was too long after it.

PY: Was there a difference of style between the two buildings?

ER: There was no style then. Yes, there was, too. Yes, very definitely. There was a designer came in here and he somewhere had gotten the design out of Sao Paulo, type of a roof. It's not a flat roof, but a very low pitch roof with clear glass, with clear story. Clear story is the glass above the door. You know what caged door is.

PY: I'm married to an architect.

ER: All right, you know. Where is he here in the desert?

PY: Palm Springs.

ER: Alone or with someone else?

PY: Alone now.

ER: He somewhere got his hands on either a book or a piece of paper or a set of plans or I don't know what, but the first of his type of design was the Sun Lodges. And you can take a look at the Sun Lodges and see that the type of design with the little pitch roof and the

clear story. And mix in a little block with plaster, lots of windows. That just grew like Topsy. Anybody came along and wanted to build a house, half of them built them themselves.

PY: You mean just based on the Sun Lodges?

ER: No, no, no. On the other side of the highway. I'm getting back to your question on the other side of the highway, Palm Village. That just kind of grew like Topsy. But now Walter White, he did the Sun Lodges, became very popular here. And everybody that built a house, many of them went to Walter White. There were no architects in this area then. And they went to Walter White.

PY: Who was?

ER: The guy who developed this Sao Paulo roof.

PY: Oh, he was the designer.

ER: And clear story. He's a designer, not an architect. He was a designer. And an awful lot of the houses were, gosh, half the houses I built came out of his office. And then Johnny came along. Do you know John?

PY: No.

ER: He was an architect here. I've used a lot of your tape,

young lady.

PY: Tape is cheap. (chuckle) A couple more questions.

Was there an actual desert style of housing that you were at all involved in including that?

ER: No. The philosophy then was you have a year of sunshine, three hundred and sixty-five days of sunshine, so let's put a lot of glass in the houses, and let's let the colors and light come in. And that was the basic philosophy as far as desert construction went. And I think the closest thing at that time to the desert construction was Walter White stuff.

PY: Is he still living?

ER: Yes, last I heard he was in Colorado or someplace like that, up in the still country.

PY: Doesn't come back to the area, huh?

ER: No.

PY: (chuckle) So there was no concern for heat loss or any of the problems that come with the summers.

ER: No. No, your roofs were open rafters and much glass, lots of corner glass. You know, you miter this plate glass and glue it together in the corners. There was a lot of that. So like some houses built from here kiddy corner and over at the other side of the fire-

places, just straight glass. Heat loss was not a factor. It was a factor, but nobody paid any attention to it.

PY: Is that because those people were living here seasonally?

ER: I think so, yes. This was a very seasonal town. Cliff was always, I remember very year he'd say, well, this is now a nine-month community or this is now a twelve-month community. And he was kidding me, kidding himself both. Well, I'd say seventy percent of the community left.

PY:

ER: Yes. Well, all right. I told you about the hundredth house in Palm Desert, first hundred homeowners. I don't think over fifty of them lived here year round.

PY: Of the fifty, were most of these people retired or working? Who stayed.

ER: Oh, they were working. They had to stay.

As far as I'm concerned, in my business, and the same would apply to your husband, my busiest time of the year was summertime. Well, the application to your husband would be true for spring because he's designing a plan for a house that I'm going to build in the summer so the owner can move in come fall, and that was the chain

of events.

PY: That's a hot time to build.

ER: Yes, it's a hot time to build. You betcha believe it.
And I finally decided the hell with it, I'm not going to do it.

PY: Where did the crews come from?

ER: Local guys. All of them local.

PY: Code or NBO?

ER: There was no code then. There was desert from the Shadow Mountain Club to Indio, nothing but desert. And from Shadow Mountain Club to Cathedral City, which was then the poor man's Palm Springs. And Indio was the poor man's Palm Desert. Crews came in out of Indio, I think. Yes, they did. We had a few in here. We had a plumber in here and we had an electrician. Carpenters came out of Indio. Still do, I guess. But we didn't have any trouble getting men. Several times Las Vegas got in trouble as far as economics goes. They did have a flat spell. And then we were flooded with people in the construction business looking for a job.

PY: Any minorities involved in this? Like Mexican?

ER: No. No minorities at all. Matter of fact, Palm Desert

was built on the fact that there would be no Jewish people in this community. And Cliff probably told you that.

PY: No, Cliff didn't, but everyone else did.

ER: Yes. No, they handled it

PY: Go ahead. Go ahead.

ER: Well, they handled it by saying you've got to be a member of the Shadow Mountain Club before you can buy property in this area. So they screened them. If they found a Jewish background, they wouldn't accept them for membership. So they weren't saying you can't buy property because you're Jews. But we were saying we're not going to let you into our club because your religion is different from ours.

PY: Do you think that the need for this community to grow when it was young has determined or had an influence on how it's been growing in the last six, seven, eight years?

ER: You have to be a little more specific than that.

PY: Well, you were saying that there was a real need for the community initially to grow and it was very painful.

ER: Yes.

PY: Well, in the last, you know, we can even talk about the

last three years, we've seen a real growth period in that sort of feverishness of growth.

ER: Right.

PY: Do you think that's come out of years of leanness?

ER: No, I don't think so. I mean it's come out of the fact that people have discovered that we have three hundred and sixty-five days of sunshine down here where the

except for possibly three months, and a lot of them don't mind that. They've got the air conditioning in the car. They've got the air conditioning in the home. They've discovered Palm Desert, they've discovered the desert. You hear references on television and in the news programs to the sun belt. Sun belt being Florida and down in there, and Southern California and Arizona and in Texas. People are going to the sunshine. I have friends up in Canada. I've been going up there every year since 1956 and fishing. We stay up there about three months and we know half the people in this little town, which is about the size of Indio. And it's getting so, oh, I guess I've seen ten couples from that area since I was up there last summer.

PY: Here.

ER: Yes.

PY: As a long time resident, how do you feel about this growth?

ER: I want to grow. I was happier when I came here than I am now from the standpoint of traffic and all the things that go along with the mushroom growth we've had. There were entirely different people, entirely different type of person.

PY: What do you mean?

ER: Well, we had the, we have the spoiled wealthy now. And we had the considerate unwealthy and partially wealthy then. It's an entirely different type of person, in my eyes. They don't have any community . . . our life was Palm Desert. Anything we could do to help Palm Desert we did, and our life was Palm Desert. That doesn't exist anymore to most people, to the people that have come in in the last ten years. They don't give a damn about Palm Desert. All they want is to come down here and sit in the sun and play golf and play tennis and enjoy themselves. And if the community is, they don't worry about how's the community getting along, how are we doing as a community. They care nothing for that. They only have their well being in

mind. You don't find them trying to put on an activity for the community or trying to get the community some publicity or doing things in other communities that will relate to our community, and let the other community know about our community. Do I make myself clear?

PY: Yes.

ER: I know I'm not alone.

PY: No. That's true. Although enough children who've grown up here at least part of their lives that have stayed around to maintain that sense of community.

ER: I'm trying to think of my son's, my oldest son's and my youngest son's friends. Many of them have left. Many of them have. I heard the kids over at the college talking. And this might be one of the reasons. They say there's nothing to do down here. The high school kids, they say the same thing. There's nothing to do down here. I would say that by and large an awful lot of them have left this area. In the first place, at the time my kids were going through school my oldest, he's thirty-seven now, there was very little for these kids to do. And if they're going to be melon pickers, they'll probably stay. But if they're going to go to college, there's no college here. And just in the last,

I don't know how many years we've had COD out here, but that's only two year. If the kids wanted a higher education, they had to go somewhere else. You go to another school and you go out of the other school and you generally, not generally, but I would say in an awful lot of cases, you've picked up employment in that area or from people of industry that visit that particular school and interview the seniors and, you know, new routine. Did your husband, where did he go to school?

PY: Harvard and Brooklyn.

ER: Okay. Where did he live?

PY: Detroit. (chuckle)

ER: I think that's part of the answers to your question.

The young people when they go to school. Now if he were living in Berkeley and he went to school in Berkeley, he'd probably still be an architect in Berkeley. At least chances are good. So I don't know of Ken's friends that are still in the mill.

PY: I was just curious if that had had any influence also with the fact that the community had

ER: I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't think there's enough of them around here to influence the

community. I know he still is, has strong feelings about Palm Desert. And I know a lot of his friends are still here, they would have. Let's see, there was seventeen at Coachella, two brothers, close friends of his. Their parents taught at Coachella. They both left the valley. I think the majority of the kids, I don't think that's going to happen so much now because we have a much more, a climate that will allow them to find employment here.

PY: I'm certain that they were drawn in that direction.

ER: Oh, yes. Yes.

PY: Were you involved with COD or the building of it?

ER: No.

PY: Or bringing it here.

ER: No. I just very interested in the enrollment in the day project. No, I had nothing to do with that.

PY: Did that seem, that was quite a controversy. Was that incorporated in this area? Did that seem like a good site to you?

ER: I don't think I ever costed it. I don't think I ever gave it that much thought. I knew Roy McCall. He taught my wife when she was in college, so I've got to know Roy. But as far as that controversy, I heard

a little bit about it, but I was just on the outer perimeter, way out.

PY: Did Ken go to school there?

ER: No, Ken went to the University of Redlands.

PY: That's right. It wouldn't have been around when he finished high school.

ER: No. And he went directly to the University of Redlands. Graduated in and was taking his masters in geophysics when the war came along. And he signed up in the Air Force to be a pilot. *What do you*

PY: What do you feel about agriculture in this area? Is it something that's been in lasting or is it moving in?

ER: Define this area.

PY: Palm Desert, Indian Wells, Rancho Mirage.

ER: You can't afford agriculture when the ground is this hot. There's no way. Even when I bought the property in northeast Indio, and that was a long time ago, and had to be twenty years ago, fifteen to twenty years ago, I couldn't afford to, I didn't figure I could afford to farm here. And also, and this is a tremendous factor, the climate here is all wrong for agriculture, citrus. It's just all wrong. It's too cold. See, this valley has got cold spots and hot spots and medium spots. So

if you've had any experience in farming, and I doubt it over there on Country Club Road, you look for the hot spots so your trees don't freeze. And this is about as cold an area as you can get in this valley, Palm Desert.

PY: Did it affect the dates or the grapes at all?

ER: Doesn't affect the dates. It doesn't affect the grapes. You get a bad year, real bad year. You get a late freeze, a March freeze, then it's going to affect your grapes. But that doesn't happen more than one year out of ten. But citrus is just brutal. You've either got to bring in that . . .

PY: It's just telling me it's getting close.

ER: Oh. Your cost of production in citrus, I went to north Indio because first I wouldn't pay the price that I had to pay here to get the farm land and setting it. No, first I wanted the climate, and secondly I didn't want to pay the price you had to pay for farm land. But I raised citrus over there by Bob Hope Drive, and I know how bitter it is to both. So I don't think this area has got a chance for farm land.

PY: Well, I just winded a ten-yard tape. (chuckle)

ER: (chuckle)

PY: Anything else you can think of that we haven't covered?

ER: No.

PY: In closing.

ER: I don't think so.

END OF INTERVIEW